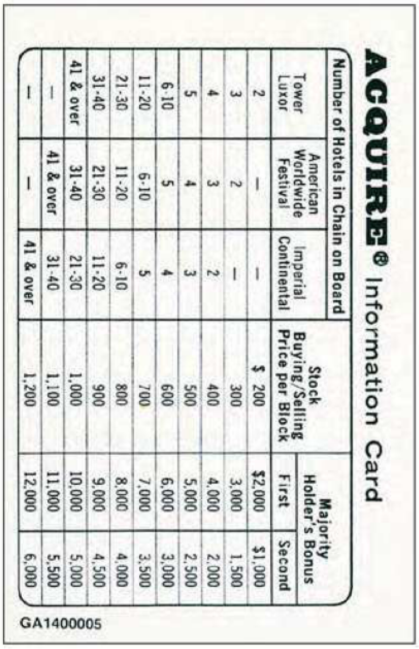
# The Game Designs of Sid Sackson

By R. Wayne Schmittberger



**ACQUIRE®** Information Card

| Number of Hotels in Chain on Board | | | Stock | Majority Holder's Bonus | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tower Luxor | American Worldwide Festival | Imperial Continental | Buying/Selling Price per Block | First | Second |
| 2 | — | — | $ 200 | $2,000 | $1,000 |
| 3 | 2 | — | 300 | 3,000 | 1,500 |
| 4 | 3 | 2 | 400 | 4,000 | 2,000 |
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 500 | 5,000 | 2,500 |
| 6-10 | 5 | 4 | 600 | 6,000 | 3,000 |
| 11-20 | 6-10 | 5 | 700 | 7,000 | 3,500 |
| 21-30 | 11-20 | 6-10 | 800 | 8,000 | 4,000 |
| 31-40 | 21-30 | 11-20 | 900 | 9,000 | 4,500 |
| 41 & over | 31-40 | 21-30 | 1,000 | 10,000 | 5,000 |
| — | 41 & over | 31-40 | 1,100 | 11,000 | 5,500 |
| — | — | 41 & over | 1,200 | 12,000 | 6,000 |

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Who is the greatest American game designer of all time? Most people in the game industry would agree that the answer is Sid Sackson (1920–2002), who created dozens of successful games throughout the last 40 years of his life. Some of his games are well-known, others less so, but pretty much all of them are superb examples of good and innovative game design.

Although most of his games are out of print, many of them can be found for sale online from time to time at websites like eBay, Board Game Geek, or Funagain Games, and they are worth looking for. However, a few years ago Face2Face Games acquired rights to many of his games and announced plans to publish some of them in the years ahead. Since then, Can't Stop, Bazaar, and the previously unpublished BuyWord have already been released.

Last year, Face2Face was acquired by Fred Distribution, which also owns Eagle and Gryphon Games, but plans to continue to produce more Sid Sackson games have not changed. In the coming year the company expects to publish new editions of I'm the Boss, Beyond Tic Tac Toe, and most likely Venture, Sleuth, and Monad, as well as a never-before-published game, I'm the Boss: The Card Game. These games will likely appear under the Gryphon Games label.

Sid was a regular visitor to the GAMES office in New York City throughout the 1980s, often dropping by to demonstrate his lastest invention or to drop off a review he'd written of someone else's new game. He had long since stopped working as an engineer, which had been his profession until around 1970, to devote full time to designing and writing about games. He was also busy amassing what was reputedly the largest game collection in the world, which filled up nearly every room of his Bronx home. Over the years he contributed some 25 original games to the pages of GAMES, including paper and pencil, board, and card games, which he would often playtest with this writer. Two of his games—the card game Open Whist and the board game Pennywise—appeared in last month's issue. His other notable GAMES games include Tromino Go (June 1994), String of Pearls (February 1996), Wiretap (October 1996), and Gotcha! (August 1997).

This article will describe several of Sid's games with a view to illustrating his skill and versatility as a game designer. He had an unparalleled knack for using clean, simple rules and innovative game mechanisms to consistently produce games full of challenging decisions and dramatic finishes. Any of these games would be a very worthy addition to any game collection.

## ACQUIRE

One of Sid Sackson's first published games, this modern classic appeared in 1962 as part of 3M's Bookshelf Series. Later editions were put out by Avalon Hill and Hasbro, which currently holds rights to it but is not currently producing it. Acquire is for three to six players, although special two-player rules have been devised. The Acquire tournament continues to be one of the most popular events at the annual World Boardgaming Championships, and the game—now 50 years old—was one of the original members of the GAMES Hall of Fame (November 1984 GAMES).

The board is a 9×12 array of slightly recessed squares labeled with coordinates from 1-A to 12-I. There are 108 tiles, each of which represents a hotel and displays the coordinates of a different square. Each player maintains a rack of six tiles, and a turn consists of playing a tile onto the square matching its coordinates, buying up to three shares of stock in any active hotel chain, and drawing a replacement tile.

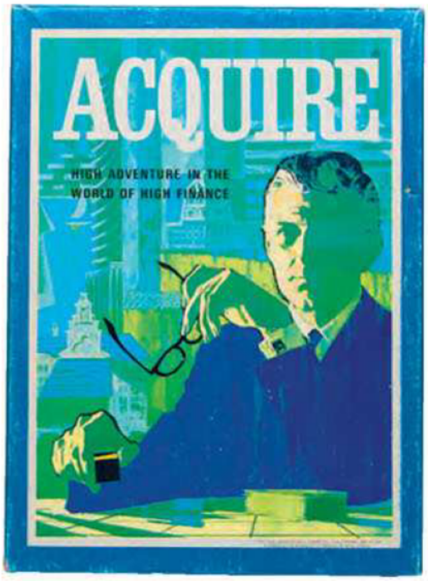
A "chain" is formed when a tile is placed horizontally or vertically adjacent to another single tile. The player who placed the tile chooses an identifying marker from among available chains (which vary in their initial stock values), places it on one of the hotels in the chain, and collects a founder's share of stock in that chain. As chains grow in size through the addition of more adjacent hotels, the price of their stock increases quickly, as shown on the Information Card on page 4.

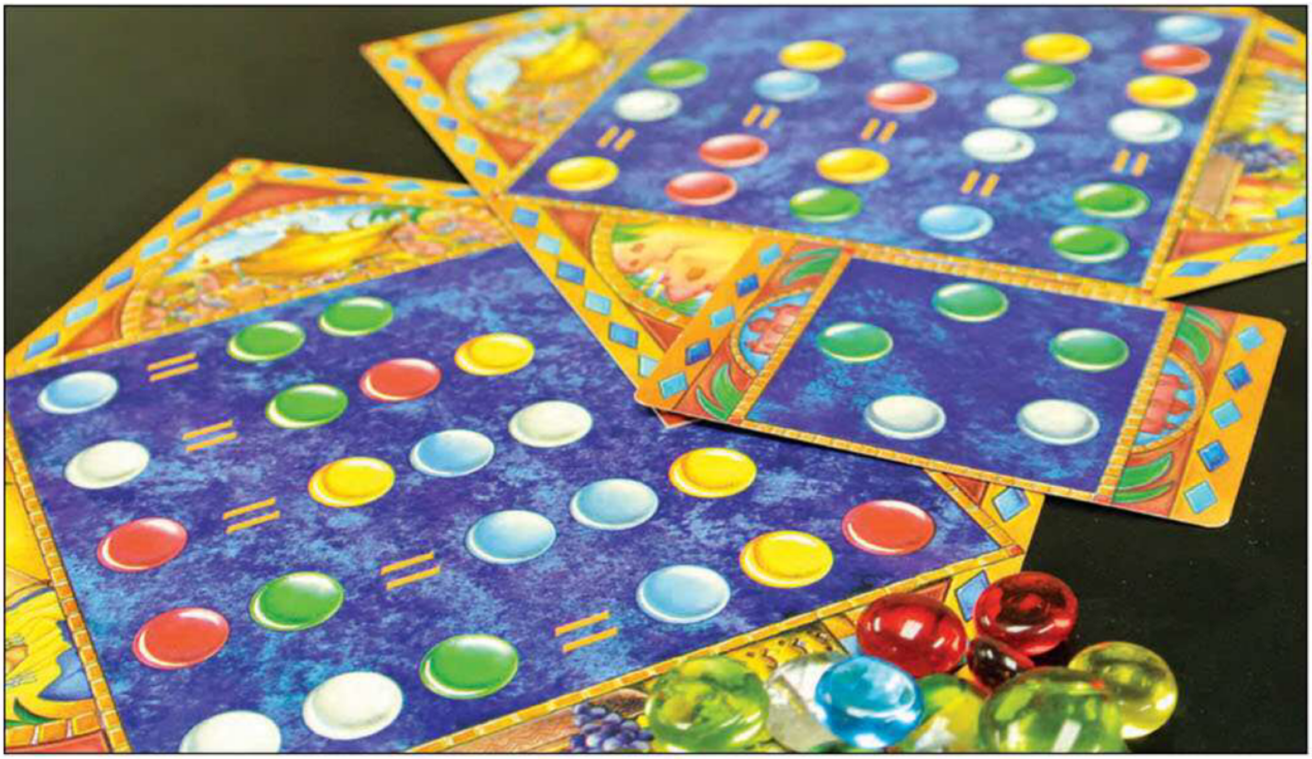
Major turning points in the game are mergers, which come about when someone places a tile that connects two chains. The smaller chain is then merged into the large one, with the following effects: (1) The smaller chain's identifying marker is removed and becomes available for use in a new chain later in the game. (2) The largest stockholder in the now-defunct chain is paid a cash bonus equal to 10 times that chain's pre-merger stock price, and the second largest stockholder is paid a bonus half that size, as shown on the reference card. (3) Shares in the defunct chain may be sold at their pre-merger price, or they may be traded for shares in the new chain (at a rate of two shares in the old chain for one new one), or they may be held in the hopes that a new chain will start up with the old chain's name.

A chain containing at least 11 hotels is safe from being merged out of existence, and so tiles that would connect two safe chains are permanently unplayable and may be exchanged for new ones. The number of chains on the board is limited to seven, and any tile that would create an eighth chain may not be played until two of the existing chains merge.

Drama builds as the end of the game approaches, with players vying to be one of the two largest shareholders in as many chains as possible. When all chains on the board are safe or when one chain contains at least 41 hotels, a player may declare the game over. Bonuses are then paid to the top two shareholders in each chain (again, 10 times the current stock price for the largest stockholder and half that much for the second largest), and all players then sell all their stock at prices based on the chains' current sizes. Whoever has the most money wins.

Difficult decisions abound in this game. Which tile should you play next? When you create a chain, should you make it one with a higher stock price, since you will earn a free share, or a lower price, which will make it cheaper to buy three more shares in the same turn? Should you buy as much stock as you can each turn, or save some money to invest in new chains later on? Which chains' stock should you buy? If you have a tile on your rack that can merge two chains, should you gamble and wait to play it after the chains have grown more so that bonuses will be larger, or play it now to get some cash that can be invested profitably? The choices players face are endlessly fascinating, despite rules that are really very simple, and the roles of luck and skill are perfectly balanced.





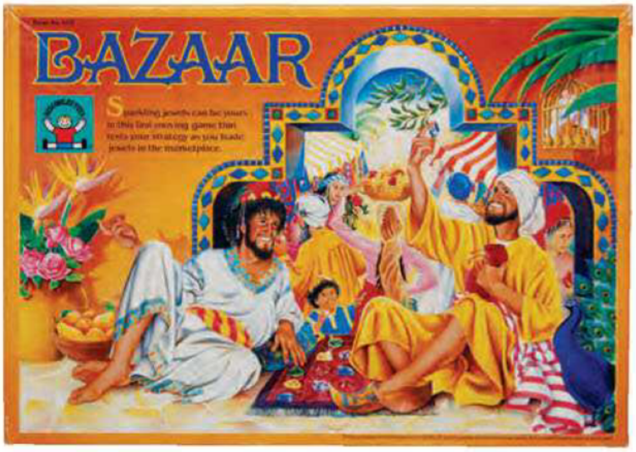
# BAZAAR

Inspired by the process of proving trignometric identities, Bazaar is nevertheless simple enough to be played by children. The game was first published by 3M in 1967, later reissued by Discovery Toys in 1987, and again recently by Face2Face (now part of Fred Distribution).

There are 20 jewels in each of five colors, represented by glass beads in this Discovery Toys edition shown. Barter Cards each show five equations in which different jewel color combinations appear on each side of the equals sign. If an equation shows one yellow equals one white and one green, for example, then a player may exchange a yellow stone for a white stone and a green stone, or a white stone and a green stone for a yellow stone. Each turn, a player either makes a trade or throws a color die, which allows him to collect a jewel of the color rolled.

Several Merchandise Cards are faceup at all times, each showing five jewels, and each player tries to acquire a combination of jewels matching those on one of those Merchandise Cards, at which time he turns in those five jewels and scores points for the card, which is discarded and replaced with another card. Efficiency is heavily rewarded: If a player has three or more jewels left over after turning in the five matching the Merchandise Card, he earns only 1 point; but if he has only two stones left over, he earns 2 points, and having one or zero stones left over earns 3 or 5 points, respectively.

Some of the Merchandise Cards have a star on them, and are worth almost double. When one stack of Merchandise Cards is depleted, the value of all future cards increases: Plain cards score as if they have a star, while starred cards score even more. This mechanism improves a player's chances of coming from behind to win, and ensures that the drama increases as the game progresses.



Ultimately, the most successful Bazaar players will be those who can visualize the results of trades and see the most trades (turns) ahead. Shown above are two Barter Cards and a Merchandise Card. If you currently have two red stones and one white stone, do you see how you can end up with the stones shown on the Merchandise Card (three green, two white), with no extra jewels left over, in just three trades (using equations on the Barter Cards)?

The solution is to trade two reds for a blue and a yellow; then trade blue for two greens; then trade yellow for a white and a green. You now have exactly what you need, with no stones left over.

Each of the following puzzles uses the equations shown on the two Barter Cards in the photo above.

1. Change ⚪⚪🟢🟡 into ⚪🟢🔵🟡🔴 in two trades, with no stones left over.

2. Change 🔵🔵🔵🔵🟡🟡 to 🟢🟢🟡🟡🔵 in two trades, with no stones left over.

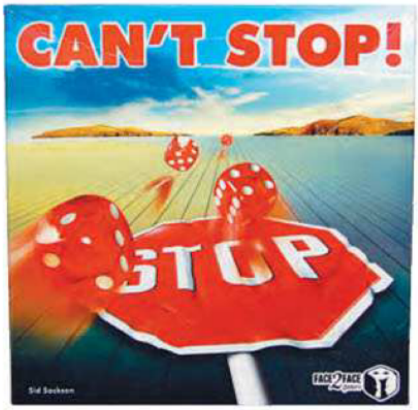
3. Change 🟡🟢⚪⚪ to ⚪⚪⚪⚪⚪ in three, trades with no stones left over.

Answers, page 58

# CAN'T STOP!

First published by Parker Brothers in 1980, Can't Stop is as good a "push your luck" game as there is. It's remarkable that a game in which pieces race up the board according to simple dice throws can give players so much to think about.

Two to four can play. The board has 11 columns of spaces, labeled from 2 through 12, numbers that represent every possible total on a pair of standard dice. On his turn, a player rolls four dice and separates them into two pairs, and then uses the totals on each pair to move one or more neutral-colored pawns up the board one space at a time in the corresponding columns. A player may then reroll and make additional moves as many times as he wishes in his turn, but to do so is not without risk. There are only three pawns in play, which will be moving up three different columns, and failure to be able to advance any of them on a particular dice throw ends the player's turn and undoes any progress he has made that turn.



Suppose that at the start of the game you roll 3-5-6-6. You could separate the dice into the pairs 3-5 and 6-6, or 3-6 and 5-6. Adding the totals, you can play 8 and 12 or 9 and 11. Suppose you pick 8 and 12; you put one pawn onto the first square of column 8 and another onto the first square of column 12. Say you roll again and get 2445. By pairing the dice as 4-4/2-5, you now can advance the pawn in the 8 column one space and also start a pawn (the third and last) in the 7 column.

Now you have a choice: to roll the dice again, or to end your turn and protect the progress you've made so far by replacing the pawns you have placed with square markers of your color. If you choose the latter, then the next time you roll a pair that adds up to 7, 8, or 12, you'll get to start the pawn from your colored marker instead of the bottom of the column. But if you roll again and fail to have a way to advance any of the three pawns, all of them will come off the board, and you'll essentially have lost your turn. Since 7 and 8 are pretty easy to roll, chances are good you'll succeed if you roll again, since the probability of being able to make at least one of the numbers 7, 8, and 12 with two of the four dice is more than 86 percent. After each successful roll, the odds of succeeding on the next roll are just as favorable, so you'll always be tempted to continue—but if you do keep rolling, sooner or later you're likely to fail.

The first player to reach the top of a column captures it (provided he ends his turn before he makes a throw he can't use), and the first player to capture three columns wins the game.

Whether to keep rolling the dice after each move is a decision that depends on many factors, including: (1) how near you are to the top of a column (it's worth some extra risk to get to the top if you're close, especially if the opponents have made some progress in the same column); (2) the probability of throwing the totals in which the temporary markers are located (6, 7, and 8 are much easier to get than 2 or 12), (3) the amount of progress you've made so far this turn (be more conservative when you have more to lose); and (4) the situation in the game (if an opponent is close to winning, your only chance may be to keep rolling). It's virtually impossible to calculate the best percentage play with all these factors to consider, and so players must develop an intuition for knowing the right time to stop.

One of the design decisions that had to be made was the relative lengths of the different columns. Only three 2's or 12's need to be thrown to reach the top, whereas it takes twelve 7's. This board geometry may tempt a player who rolls 1-1-6-6 to start the 2 and 12 columns instead of moving twice in the 7 column.

Tension builds late in the game when some columns have been claimed by players, with the result that those columns' numbers are no longer available for the dice roller, making further rolls increasingly dangerous just as it becomes more important to take chances to outrace the other players in the remaining columns. The game design is a brilliant example of how to balance risk with reward.

# Sleuth

Sleuth is deceptively simple, and yet many consider it the best pure deduction game ever. Think of Clue without a board, but with a twist that there are two different types of questions that players can choose to ask.

From three to seven can play; the more players, the more complicated the game is. To begin, a deck of 36 Gem cards is shuffled. Each card depicts a unique combination of three elements: gem types (Diamond, Pearl, or Opal), gem colors (Red, Blue, Green, or Yellow), and gem settings (Solitaire, Pair, or Cluster). One card is removed and hidden, and the object of the game is to be the first player to guess what it is. The remaining cards are completely dealt out so that each player gets an equal number. If the deck doesn't divide evenly by the number of players, the extra cards are turned faceup for all to see.

Next, players are each dealt four cards faceup from a Search Deck. Each Search Card specifies a type of question a player may ask. During a turn, a player chooses one of his Search Cards and chooses an opponent to question. If the card says "Pairs," he can only ask how many Pairs the opponent has, and the opponent answers aloud for everyone to hear. That's an example of a one-element Search Card. If the Search Card names two elements, such as Blue Opals, the questioner may ask the opponent to pass him facedown all cards having both those elements. There are also Free Choice Search Cards that can be used as either one-element or two-element searches, at the player's discretion. After a Search Card is used, it is discarded and a new one is drawn.

An optional "Supersleuth" rule can be used to make the game even more challenging: When a player makes a two-element search, the opponent responds by saying the number of matching cards he has but does not reveal which ones they are.

## A Sleuth Puzzle

Here's a Sleuth-based puzzle that Sid Sackson created for GAMES more than 30 years ago (see January/February 1979 GAMES). Suppose, in a four-player game of Sleuth, that you know the location of 11 Gem cards as shown in the chart below, eight in your own hand and three exposed after the deal. In the course of the game you learn the following information about your opponents—players A, B, and C:

**A** has 1 Red Pearl card, 0 Green Solitaire cards, 1 Red Opal card, 2 Pearl Pair cards, 3 Green cards.

**B** has 2 Red Opal cards, 2Yellow cards, 4 Diamond cards, 1 Green Cluster card, 2 Blue Pearl Cards.

**C** has 1 Opal Cluster card, 3Yellow cards, 1Yellow Diamond card, 2 Opal Pair cards, 0 Blue Cluster cards.

What is the missing piece of jewelry?

**ANSWER, PAGE 58**

| 🟨 | 🟩 | 🟦 | 🟥 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OWN HAND | OWN HAND | OWN HAND | ◇ | DIAMONDS |
| | | | | ◇◇ | |
| | | OWN HAND | | ◇◇◇ | |
| EXPOSED | | | EXPOSED | ○ | PEARLS |
| | | | | ○○ | |
| | | | OWN HAND | ○○○ | |
| OWN HAND | | OWN HAND | | ⬯ | OPALS |
| | | OWN HAND | | ⬯⬯ | |
| | EXPOSED | | | ⬯⬯⬯ | |

# BuyWord

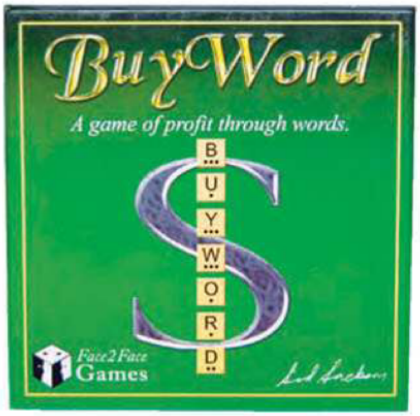
This elegant boardless word game deserves to become as popular as Scrabble and Boggle, yet it remained unpublished until 2004, two years after Sid Sackson passed away. It immediately became our Game of the Year (December 2004 GAMES). The idea is simple: A set of letter tiles (from two to five, varying randomly each round) is revealed for each player, and each player decides whether to buy them. The player must buy all or none—buying just some of the tiles is not allowed. Once purchased, tiles can be used to form words, which in turn can be sold to the bank. Players compete to make the greatest profit.

Each letter tile displays a letter and from one to four dots. The cost of a set of tiles is the square of the number of dots on them, and the value of a word is the square of the total number of dots on its letter tiles. What could be simpler? But deciding whether to sell a short word now or try for a longer word later—that can be difficult. At the end of a turn, a player who has more than eight tiles must get rid of the excess by selling a word or discarding tiles.

If you've ever lost at Scrabble because your opponent happened to draw both blanks during a game and made a seven-letter word bonus with each of them, you'll appreciate the wisdom of the "Wild" tile rule in BuyWords. There are nine Wild tiles that can be used as any letter, and at the start of a game they are divided evenly among the players (one of them is not used if there are two or four players). Wild tiles do not count toward the eight-tile hand limit. A player may use them at any time, but no more than one may be used in the same word. Deciding when to use a Wild tile is one of the game's most difficult challenges.

A popular optional rule is the Drafts variant, in which all the tiles drawn by the players in a round are put into a common pool and are "drafted" (taken) one at a time by the players, and only after that do players decide whether to buy the ones they've chosen. Another variant allows players to put up their tiles for auction, hoping to eventually buy them for less than the usual price.

An appreciation of BuyWord can be found at http://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/737111/enders-comprehensive-pictorial-overview-eat-your.

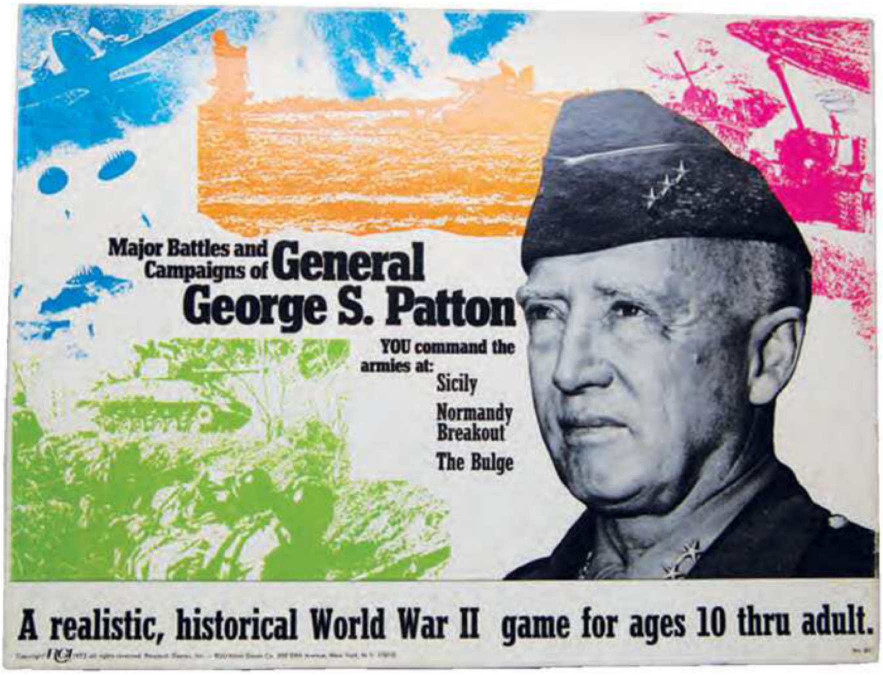


## Major Battles and Campaigns of General George S. Patton

Wargames are often very complex, drawn-out affairs, but Sid Sackson's Major Battles of General George S. Patton (1974, Research Games)—one of just two wargames he designed (the other being Major Campaigns of General Douglas MacArthur)—uses simple yet original mechanisms that are the hallmark of his games. Major Battles is actually three games in one, with scenarios of the Allied invasion of Sicily, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Normandy Breakout, all using the same basic rules. The rule system and the Sicily scenario were by Sid Sackson, and the other two scenarios were contributed by Robert Champer.

The board is two-sided. One side shows a map of Sicily, and the other side has two separate maps for the other two scenarios. (The board can be folded in half so that only one or the other of these is visible.) The objects in the three scenarios are generally for one side to gain control of certain key towns, sometimes within a particular number of turns.

A simple but original and clever mechanism causes players to have different movement allowances from one another, but in a way that balances out perfectly fairly. Each player has his own deck of cards showing how many movement points may be spent that turn, from 1 to 10. Each deck is shuffled and placed facedown. On the first turn, the Allied player turns over a card and uses as many movement points as shown. The Axis player then turns over a card and uses the sum of the points on his card and the Allied player's card. The Allied player then turns over a card and uses points equal to the sum of that card and the opponent's last card. And so on. This creates a realistic ebb and flow in which the initiative passes back and forth between the players.


Major Battles and Campaigns of General George S. Patton
YOU command the armies at:
Sicily
Normandy Breakout
The Bulge
A realistic, historical World War II game for ages 10 thru adult.

Another key mechanism is the way movement points may be used. There are three types of roads, represented by solid, dashed, and dotted lines. Moving a unit from one town to another along a solid road costs 1 movement point, while moving along dashed or dotted roads costs 2 or 3 points, respectively. A maximum of five units may use the same road segment in a turn, but otherwise there are no restrictions: 10 points may be spent moving a single unit 10 road segments, or 10 units 1 road segment each, or any other combination in between.

Resolution of combat also has an unusual twist in which each dice roll serves two different purposes. Each player has a set of five dice. When one player's units attack the other's, each side rolls one die for each armored unit and one die for each pair of infantry units that he has in the fight. Casualties are determined by the number of matching dice a player throws: A pair of the same number inflicts one casualty, three of a kind two casualties, etc. (If a player is throwing only one die, he must roll a 6 to inflict one casualty.) For each casualty suffered, a player loses an infantry unit, and if none of those are available, an armored unit is lost for each two casualties. Now here's the twist: Regardless of who suffers more casualties, the side who rolled the lower total on all dice must retreat to an adjacent town. Rolling more dice than your opponent improves your odds of inflicting casualties but by no means guarantees that you won't be the one who has to retreat.

The Sicily scenario, unlike the other two, does not end after a specific number of turns. But there is still a sense of urgency for the Allied player to achieve his objective of capturing Messina quickly, before the Axis player has received many reserves. Because the Allied player receives no reinforcements during the game, time is not on his side. One of the interesting problems for the Axis player to puzzle over is how to deploy his 9 Armored Units and 24 Infantry Units at the start so as best to be able to repel or contain an Allied invasion of the island while also protecting Messina. The limitless number of different possible setups assures that the game can be replayed indefinitely without seeming repetitious.

We've looked at six very different kinds of games designed by Sid Sackson: a strategy board game with an ideal mix of luck and skill; a game of bartering in which whoever can see further trades ahead should win; a push-your-luck game in which risk-taking increases as the game progresses; a game of subtle deductive reasoning; an elegant boardless word game in which letters become investments; and an uncomplicated, refreshingly original wargame. They all have simple mechanics yet pose complex problems for players to solve. All are also games in which players can improve their skills through experience, bringing greater enjoyment each time they play.

These are just samples of Sid Sackson's great body of work. A great deal of additional information about him and his other games can be found at the website "The Great Games of Sid Sackson," http://webnoir.com./bob/sackson.htm. The site includes an article by Minda Zetlin titled "The Guru of Games," which originally appeared in the February/March 1987 issue of GAMES and can be found online at http://webnoir.com./bob/sid/zetlin.htm.